DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 409 083 PS 025 014

TITLE Sex, Kids and the Family Hour: A Three-Part Study of Sexual Content on Television. A Special Report from Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation.

INSTITUTION Children Now, Oakland, CA.; Kaiser Foundation, Oakland, Calif.

PUB DATE 96

NOTE 15p.; For related documents, see PS 025 011-013.

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Childhood Attitudes; Children; Content Analysis; Focus Groups; Mass Media Effects; Parent Attitudes; *Programming (Broadcast); *Sexuality; *Television; Television Research; Television Surveys; Television Viewing

IDENTIFIERS *Family Hour (Television); Television Networks

ABSTRACT

This series of studies focused on the content of television programming about sexual activity and sexual relationships, examining what messages are communicated in the so-called "family hour," the first hour of prime time broadcast television (8-9 p.m. in most areas of the country). First, a content analysis documented the nature of sexual messages airing during this period. Second, a series of focus groups with children age 8 to 13 recorded their responses to family hour programs containing sexual content; and third, a national survey gathered parental opinion about the family hour and the issue of sex on TV. Key findings from the content analysis are: (1) television programs broadcast during the family hour contain a significant amount of sexual content, far more than was broadcast during the previous two decades; (2) most of the sexual behavior is relatively modest, with notable exceptions; and (3) a few shows do a good job of emphasizing the risks and responsibilities of sexual activity. Key findings from the focus groups are: (1) most of the older children, and at least some of the youngest, understood the sexual content, even the jokes and innuendoes about sex; (2) most of the children understood and enjoyed the programs with clear, positive messages; and (3) shows with mixed messages left children confused. Finally, key findings from the public opinion survey are: (1) the amount of sexual content on TV worries parents as much as, if not more than, violent content; (2) children often watch TV alone, and sometimes watch shows that their parents do not know about; and (3) parents give TV some credit for presenting sexual issues responsibly. (EV)

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Family Hour

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Sex, Kids and the Family Hour
A Three-Part Study of Sexual Content on Television

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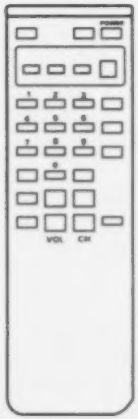
A Special Report from Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation

Overview



The impact of television on young people's lives is commanding increased attention from parents, teachers, lawmakers and the entertainment industry itself — and for good reason. After all, the average child watches three to four hours a day of television, more time than he or she spends in the classroom, or in any other activity besides sleeping. And we know from decades of academic research — as well as from common sense and personal experience — that television can influence children's attitudes and behaviors.

Indeed, concern about what children see on television has prompted a flurry of activity over the past year: the passage of legislation requiring television sets to include a "v-chip" so parents can block unwanted content; an agreement by the television industry to develop a system for rating television programs regarding their sexual and violent content; new rules requiring TV stations to provide a minimum of three hours a week of educational TV for kids; and efforts to persuade television programmers to reserve the first hour of prime time for shows that are suitable for all ages — the return of the "family hour."

In the series of studies presented in this report, we focus on the content of television programming about sexual activity and sexual relationships, examining what messages are communicated in the so-called "family hour," the first hour of prime time broadcast television (8-9 p.m. in most areas of the country). More children watch TV during this time period than on Saturday mornings or weekday afternoons. In fact, seventeen out of the top twenty-five programs watched by children ages 2-11 are aired during prime time; on any given evening, more than a million children under the age of 11 watch shows such as *Beverly Hills 90210, Roseanne, The Nanny* or *Friends.*

We chose to look at the kinds of messages about sex that children are getting from television because the consequences of sexual activity can be so significant in a young person's life. Each year more than 700,000 teenage girls have unplanned pregnancies, and millions of young people become infected with sexually-transmitted diseases. More than 2,500 teens have AIDS, and experts believe that at least 20,000 adults now infected with the AIDS virus likely contracted the disease during their teen years.

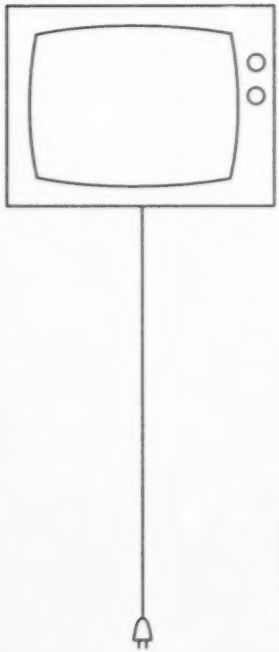
Each year more than 700,000 teenage girls have unplanned pregnancies, and millions of young people become infected with sexually-transmitted diseases.

This report summarizes the data collected in three separate studies commissioned by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now about sexual messages on television and the impact of those messages on children and families.

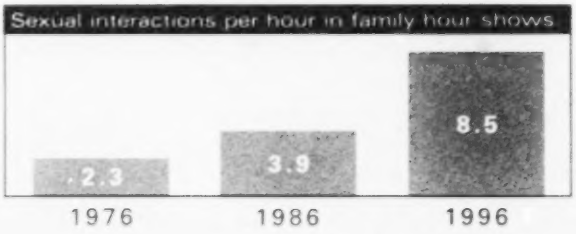
First, a content analysis documents the nature of the sexual messages on shows that air during TV's family hour. Second, a series of focus groups with children ages 8-13 record their responses to family hour programs containing sexual content. And lastly, a national survey reflects parental opinion about television's family hour and the issue of sex on TV, focusing especially on the views of parents of younger children, as well as opinions from children themselves.

Content Analysis

Sexual Messages on Television's Family Hour



The content analysis looked at the amount and nature of sexual content in television programs broadcast during the family hour on the major commercial networks. The goal of the study was not simply to count the number of sexual interactions, but also to examine the context of sexual depictions and the nature of the messages communicated about sex. Special attention was given to identifying and analyzing messages about sexual risks or responsibilities. To gain a historical context, a sample of family hour programs from the 1976 and 1986 seasons was analyzed for comparative purposes. In order to provide a snapshot of the most recent family hour programming, a week's worth of shows from the fall 1996 season were also analyzed and reported on separately.



Key Findings

Television programs broadcast during the family hour contain a significant amount of sexual content, far more than was broadcast during the previous two decades.

- Three out of four family hour programs on the networks (75%) contain some sexual content. By comparison, 65% of shows in the same time period in 1986, and 43% of shows from 1976 contained sexual content.

- The study measured two different types of sexual content: "talk about sex" and "sexual behavior." Both have increased substantially over the past 20 years. Sexual behavior, which encompasses overt physical actions ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse, increased the most dramatically. Today 61% of family hour shows contain sexual behavior, up from 48% in 1986 and 26% in 1976.

- Since much of the sexual content on television can be minor in nature, the study also examined what proportion of family hour programs included scenes in which there was a *primary emphasis* on sex, meaning that the sexual content was the most important

aspect of the scene. This analysis revealed that 30% of family hour programs in 1996 featured scenes with a primary emphasis on sex, up from 23% in 1986 and 9% in 1976.

• There were an average of 8.5 sexual interactions per hour of programming during the family hour in 1996, with roughly one-third of these involving talk about sex and two-thirds involving physical behaviors. This represents a marked increase over levels observed in previous years; the overall amount of sexual interactions increased 118% since 1986 (3.9 per hour) and 270% since 1976 (2.3 per hour).

Most of the sexual behavior on the family hour is relatively modest, although there were several notable exceptions.

• Of the overt physical actions observed in family hour television programming in the 1996 season, the most common action was flirtation, followed closely by kissing. Collectively, these two categories accounted for 84% of all sexual behaviors observed.

• However, during the three weeks of programming sampled in the winter of 1996, 15 cases of sexual intercourse were either depicted or implied.

A few shows do a good job of emphasizing the risks and responsibilities of sexual activity.

• A handful of shows not only raise issues regarding sexual risks and responsibilities, but actually make those issues the primary themes of their programs. In 1996, 6% of all shows with sexual content had an overall emphasis on these topics, such as waiting until a relationship matures before having sex, or pursuing efforts to prevent STDs or unwanted pregnancy when sexually active.

• In both the 1976 and 1986 samples, only one scene even mentioned any topic about risks or responsibilities.

Overall, the vast majority of sexual content in the family hour is not accompanied by any message about sexual risks or responsibilities.

• Just 9% of the scenes that included sexual content in 1996 had any mention of issues relating to sexual risks or responsibilities, such as condoms, abstinence, abortion, AIDS or STDs.

• None of the examples of sexual intercourse were linked with any discussion of risk or responsibility, nor were precautions depicted.

Most of the sexual behavior featured during the family hour occurs between characters who have an established relationship with one another.

- Only 6% of all sexual behavior during the family hour involved characters who had just met or were on a first date.
- With respect to the instances of implied or depicted sexual intercourse, three out of four involved characters who had an established relationship with one another.

A small proportion of the sexual interactions occurred between teenage characters; these interactions were generally modest in nature and were more likely to be accompanied by a message of sexual responsibility.

- Twelve percent of all sexual interactions observed in the 1996 program sample involved teenagers. In terms of frequency, sexual interactions that included a teenager occurred an average of once an hour.
- The interactions involving teenagers were almost entirely limited to either talk about sex, flirtation or kissing.
- Almost a third of the sexual interactions involving teens (29%) were presented in the context of shows that were judged to include an overall emphasis on the need for sexual responsibility.

Snapshot — The New Fall Season

In order to take a quick look at the most current season of programming, a one week sample of family hour shows from October 1996 was analyzed. In this sample, the amount of sexual content remained high — in fact, there were an average of 9.4 sexual interactions per hour, compared to 8.5 in the previous season. There were two instances in which sexual intercourse was implied or depicted during family hour programs. Only 3% of the scenes with sexual content had any mention of issues regarding sexual risks or responsibilities, compared to 9% in the previous season. Once again, none of the examples involving sexual intercourse addressed any risk or responsibility concerns.

Methodology

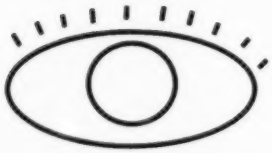
This study was conducted by Dale Kunkel, Professor of Communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara, with assistance from Kirstie Cope and Carolyn Colvin. A total of 122 hours of television programming encompassing 182 shows broadcast over a 20-year period was examined. The primary focus of study was the programming presented on a regular basis in the winter of 1996. The four largest networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC) were included in the sample. Three randomly selected episodes of each regularly scheduled program were recorded in January and March, 1996.

To compare how sexual messages have been presented on television over time, a sample of past programming from 1976 and 1986 was also obtained. These samples were limited to one episode of each program scheduled during the 8-9 p.m. time period, on the three major commercial broadcast networks in existence at that time. For the "snapshot" of programming from the fall of 1996, one episode of each regularly scheduled show airing during the first hour of prime time was recorded in October, 1996. The fall programming was analyzed and reported independently in the "snapshot" section of this report.

> Only 9% of the scenes with sexual content made any mention of the risks or responsibilities of sexual activity.

Focus Groups

Children Respond to Sexual Content on TV



In order to get a sense of how children interpret the sexual content on television, a series of focus groups with children ages 8-13 were convened. The children viewed a selection of clips containing sexual content from programs that aired in 1996 during the family hour. The children were separated by gender and by age group (8-10 year-olds and 11-13 year-olds). In some instances, parents watched their children through closed circuit TV.

Key Findings

Most of the older children — and at least some of the youngest — understood the sexual content, even the jokes and innuendos about sex.

• Although some of the sexual content went over their heads, much of it did not. Even in the groups of 8-10 year olds, some of the children understood a joke in *The Nanny* about Fran losing her "virgin.... airlines ticket" to be about her virginity, and understood that a reference to whipped cream in *Jeff Foxworthy* was about a man intending to "squirt whipped cream all over [his wife] and lick it off."

Most of the children understood and enjoyed the programs with clear, positive messages.

• After watching a segment of *Malibu Shores* about a high school girl who thinks she might be pregnant, the children said the message they got was that "If you're worried about your future, you shouldn't have sex," and "Even condoms aren't 100%," repeating almost verbatim some of the lines in the show.

• After viewing a clip from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* in which a teenage girl is deciding whether or not to have sex for the first time, the children said her older brother was worried "whether she was too young to have sex," and was concerned about her "getting AIDS" or "getting pregnant," two issues that were mentioned on the program. They felt the show was about "not having sex until you're ready." Many of the children mentioned that particular episode as their favorite because "it taught me something," or because "she stood up for what she believed in. She wasn't ready to have sex and she told him."

Not surprisingly, shows with mixed messages left the children confused.

• One clip from *Beverly Hills 90210* was about a group of college students participating in a 24-hour "sex out" to raise

awareness about abstinence and AIDS. Much of the show was about a female character trying to get her boyfriend to break his 24-hour vow of celibacy. The children understood that the show was about "abstinence," and "not having sex," but noted that "it still sounded like they all wanted to have sex." One young boy, when asked what the message of the show was, said "They were saying not having sex is hard, but it's still...they weren't saying anything, really."

Parents expressed concern about some of the sexual messages on television, but also found TV to be a good way to broach important issues with their children.

- Some parents appeared frustrated about television encouraging their kids to grow up too soon. As one mom said, "You do want to be able to wash the dishes for a second or so and not worry about him learning about sex before you want him to."

- Many parents seemed to feel that television could be a useful ally in helping them bring up important subjects with their kids. One parent commented that TV shows "teach my daughter something. She gets to see different ways of handling situations, and I think that's a good thing." Another parent noted, "It's a good thing, when the topics do come up. I know for my daughter, that's when she'll ask a question."

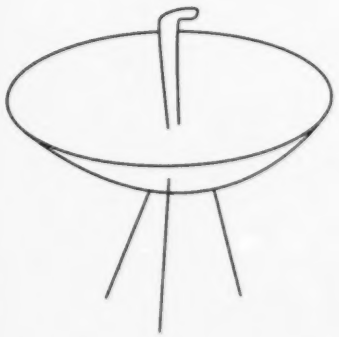
Methodology

The focus groups were conducted by the public opinion research firm Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin and Associates. A total of eight focus groups were conducted among children 8-13 years old, in Chicago, Illinois and San Jose, California. The children were separated by gender and by age group (8-10 year-olds and 11-13 year-olds). All of the groups had a mix of ethnicity and urban/suburban residency. The parents of the younger groups in Chicago, and of all groups in San Jose, watched their children through closed circuit TV and spoke after the sessions with the moderators.

During the focus groups, the children viewed a videotape of clips from programs that aired in 1996 during the family hour. The content shown to the children reflected the range of approaches to sexual content found during family hour programs. The shows chosen were by no means either the most graphic in their depiction of sex or the most direct in their sex-related dialogue. The tape included an over-representation of programs that raised issues regarding sexual risks or responsibilities. Each of the clips came from shows with more than a million viewers under the age of 11.

Public Opinion Survey

Parents Speak Up About Television Today



In order to help determine how parents feel about television today, a nationwide survey questioned parents about how they think sexual content in the family hour is impacting their families. Some of their children (ages 10-12 only) were also surveyed about their television viewing.

Key Findings

The amount of sexual content on TV worries parents as much as, if not more than, violent content.

• Forty-three percent of parents of children ages 8-12 say they worry a "great deal" about the amount of sexual content that their children are exposed to when watching television, and an additional 28 percent say they are at least "somewhat" concerned. By comparison, 39 percent say they worry a "great deal" about violent content on television, and 36 percent say they are at least "somewhat" concerned.

Children often watch TV alone, and sometimes watch shows that their parents don't know about.

• More than two-thirds (68%) of parents of children ages 8-12 say they are able to watch television with their children at most half of the time. Although most — 72 percent — say they "usually" or "always" know what their kids are watching, this may not actually be the case. In more than a quarter of households (28%) the parents think they know more often what their child is watching than the child says is the case.

Parents give TV some credit for presenting sexual issues responsibly.

• Thirty percent of parents of children ages 8-12 say TV generally portrays sexual issues in an "informative or socially-responsible way," and 31 percent say this is true at least some of the time. However, another third (31%) of parents say television "hardly ever" portrays sexual content in a useful manner.

Parents see a role for television in shaping children's views on sexual issues in a positive way.

• Many parents hold out hope that television could play a more positive role in helping children learn about making responsible decisions about sex: 35 percent say television could have "a lot" of influence, and 43 percent say at least "a little." Only 21 percent say there is no role for television in teaching children about sexual responsibility.

Sexual content on TV is a chance for some families to talk about tough issues.

• Thirty-eight percent of parents of 8-12 year-olds say that when they see something "inappropriate" on TV, they talk with their child about it. Forty-five percent say their child has at some point asked a question about sex, AIDS, or some other sensitive issue because of something they saw on TV.

Although many parents aren't familiar with the term "family hour," the vast majority support the concept.

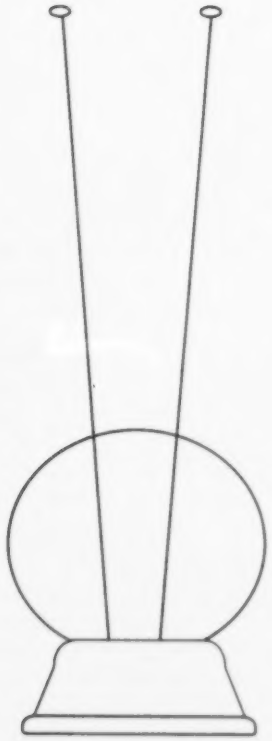
• Although a majority (60%) of parents of younger children have never heard of the "family hour" with regard to television, three-quarters think that during the first hour of television programming the networks should only broadcast shows that are appropriate for all ages. Even among Americans with no children under the age of 18 currently in the household, 70 percent say they think this should be the networks' policy. Only 26 percent of parents of 8-12 year-olds think there are enough shows on now that are appropriate for their child; 72 percent say there are not enough.

Methodology

The survey was designed by the Kaiser Family Foundation, Children Now, and Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA), and conducted by PSRA between October 3-29, 1996. The results presented here are based on a national random-sample telephone survey of 421 parents with children ages 8-12. The margin of error for the parents is plus or minus 5 percent. In addition, 164 children of these parents, ages 10-12, were also interviewed by telephone for this survey. The margin of error is plus or minus 8 percent for this sample.

A second national random-sample survey of 1,010 adults, ages 18 and older, was interviewed by telephone by PSRA between October 30 - November 3, 1996 on additional questions pertaining to television programming today. Included in this second survey was a sub-sample of 167 parents of children between the ages of 8-12. The margin of error for the national sample is plus or minus 3 percent. The margin of error for the sub-sample of parents of children ages 8-12 in this survey is plus or minus 8 percent.

Conclusion



The three studies summarized in this report offer a wealth of new information concerning sexual content on television, and how that content impacts children and families.

The studies reveal that there is an abundance of sexual content on television shows that air during the early evening hours, often termed the "family hour," a time that is particularly popular with younger children. They also indicate that while some programs mention the risks and responsibilities of sexual activity, most of the sexual content on television does not include any emphasis on these themes.

Although more research needs to be done to understand how children are affected by the sexual content on television, the focus groups reported on here indicate that children appear to be picking up the sexual information presented to them on television — taking away confused messages when programs send mixed signals and clearer messages when shows offer a more straightforward perspective. Children appear to appreciate the positive, responsible messages some shows offer them.

With regard to parents, both the focus groups and the surveys indicate that the vast majority are deeply concerned about the amount of sexual content on television, particularly during the family hour. Many are especially concerned that they cannot always monitor their children's viewing as closely as they feel they should, particularly during these early evening hours when household chores beckon. On the other hand, most parents see a role for television as a communicator of messages about sexual risks and responsibilities and some report having experienced the positive benefits of having television programs help them raise important issues about sex with their children.

As the public debate about the family hour, the v-chip and a TV rating system intensifies, it is our hope that these studies will help inform and enlighten concerned parents, policymakers, television industry leaders, and young people themselves.

Acknowledgments

This report is based on research commissioned by Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation. Full copies of the studies summarized in this report can be obtained from either organization.

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This report was written by Victoria Rideout of Children Now and Tina Hoff of the Kaiser Family Foundation. Report designed by: Dennis Johnson, Ted Szeto, and Joan Black.
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